

Gassing, Burning, and Burying

Relative Capacities Reported for the Aktion Reinhardt Camps

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Let's say, hypothetically speaking, that someone wanted to design and implement a systematic process for mass-murdering hundreds of thousands of people, in a short period of time, using poisonous gas. How might one go about doing this? This is the question that must have been brought to bear on certain high-ranking individuals in the Nazi regime, sometime in late 1941—if we are to believe the conventional Holocaust story.

Or perhaps it was much earlier. In fact the western media had been reporting for years prior that the Germans wanted to “exterminate” the Jews. On 16 August 1933, the *New York Times* wrote that “600,000 [Jews] are facing certain extermination” in Germany (p. 11). Three years later that same paper discussed a petition decrying the “intolerable sufferings of the millions of Jews in the European holocaust,” and calling for “bold measures to save these unfortunate millions from total annihilation” (31 May 1936; p. 14). In 1938 the *London Times* wrote of the “terrible persecution of the Jews in Germany,” remarking that Germany was “a country which seemed disposed...to exterminate a section of its population” (14 December; p. 11). In June of 1940, the *New York Times* reported that “six million Jews are doomed to destruction,” and that they were facing “the danger of physical annihilation” (June 25; p. 4). I hasten to add here that, in spite of such claims, we have no clear evidence that either Hitler or any of the leading Nazis sought to murder millions of Jews; rather, their plan seems to have been deportation and expulsion, combined with a large measure of forced labor.



Odilo Globocnik, 1938

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But presuming that they did aim for physical extermination, let's consider the perspective of some unknown mid-ranking SS man who was given the task of designing a quick and efficient mass murder scheme. He would likely have been working in Lublin, reporting to Odilo Globocnik, when the "verbal order" came down from Himmler in October 1941 to construct such a system. Our friend must have been in a terrible fix: as Raul Hilberg reminds us, there was neither a plan nor a budget for such activity.^[1] Nor was there any written order, from Himmler, Goebbels, Hitler, or anyone else. Evidently he was simply told to "make it happen," or some such thing. (Anyone who has ever worked in a large bureaucracy can surely relate to the poor man's plight.)

By late 1941 the Reich had experienced a monumental rise in the number of Jews under its control. At one time in the 1930s some 600,000 Jews lived in Germany proper, though with the coming of Hitler they fled by the thousands each year. With the *Anschluss* of Austria in March 1938, another 200,000 came into the Reich—but many of these too fled. Not that this was of concern to the Nazi leadership; they wanted nothing more than to drive the Jews out. In fact it was at this time that the first concrete plans for removing them came to light. Goebbels recorded in his diary of April 11 that "The Führer wants the Jews completely squeezed out of Germany. To Madagascar, or some such place. Right!"^[2]

With the rapid German take-over of Poland in September 1939, 1.7 million more Jews came under Nazi control. Combined with the approximately 250,000 still remaining in Germany and Austria, the total came to nearly 2 million. A number of plans were circulated on how to deal with the growing Jewish problem, including the Nisko project (for a Jewish reservation in Poland), mass deportation or ghettoization, and the Madagascar plan.

As the Axis alliance was formed and the war expanded, the Germans captured additional territory (the Low Countries in early May 1940, France in mid-June), along with thousands of other Jews. Longerich reports (2010: 163-164) that internal estimates grew from 3.25 million in late June, to 4 million by mid-August, up to roughly 6 million (!) by late 1940. Thus it was that, by 1941, the Nazi leadership found themselves with a 6-million-Jew problem.^[3]

Of this total, about a third—in fact, precisely 2,284,000—resided in the five districts of Poland known as the General Government.^[4] On the orthodox view, Globocnik and team were charged with "exterminating" them. This plan was dubbed *Aktion Reinhardt* (AR) by those alleging it, and according to them involved primarily the construction of three camps in southeastern Poland: Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. If we can believe the USHMM, they managed to ultimately kill 1.7 million in the span of about 18 months.^[5]

But back to our hapless SS man. When the verbal order arrived in October 1941, he would have immediately begun plans to construct the gassing facilities. So let us try to reconstruct the thinking process. Our man is given vague direction to systematically kill, and dispose of, over 2 million people in some short (but unspecified) period of time. Let us say that his time frame matched the actual duration—the 18 months—that the camps operated, and that he intended to kill them within a year and a half. So he must design a system to kill, in aggregate, something like 130,000 Jews per month, or about 4,200 per day, for 18 straight months (winter included, of course).

Of the many killing options open to him (shooting, drowning, suffocation, exposure, etc.), our man inexplicably decides to gas them with carbon monoxide from the exhaust of diesel engines. I set aside here all the absurdities of this method, and presume for the sake of argument that it could work, and would be able to kill rooms full of people within, say, 30 minutes.[\[6\]](#)

Designing a single large extermination camp would be somewhat risky, so let's suppose he goes with two camps—good to have a back-up facility, just in case. Likely both would be of similar construction, and each would be designed to handle half load, that is, about 2,100 people per day. So he drafts up a standard carbon monoxide gassing structure: one building with 3 chambers, each, say, 4 x 5 meters. Assuming (conservatively) 5 people per square meter, each room could gas 100 people; thus, 3 rooms can handle 300 at a time.

Then our man allows a 2-hour cycle time—30 minutes to (simultaneously) load the 3 rooms, 30 to gas, and one hour to remove the 300 bodies. The unloading would be relatively easy: no poisonous Zyklon-B hanging around, no gas masks, just open the doors and haul the bodies out. Figuring seven such cycles per day—about a 14-hour work day—yields the desired daily toll of 2,100. It's a perfect scheme: two simple camps built in remote locations along rail lines, no other facilities needed, job done in a year and a half.

Ah, but wait...one more thing: body disposal. Two thousand bodies per day is quite a heap. It would take acres of mass graves to hold them all, and even these would only hide, not destroy, the evidence. Better to build cheap, high-volume crematoria. Knowing that it takes one hour to fully incinerate, down to ash, one body, our designer would need 100 muffles (oven openings), operating 20 hours per day, to handle the load. Compare to Auschwitz. The largest crematoria there—Kremas 2 and 3—each had 15 muffles. So our man needs the equivalent of *seven* Crema 2's to do the job. At each camp. And coke to fuel them all. So much for 'no budget, no plan.'

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That's all hypothetical, but something like that must have happened, according to traditionalism. Let's now compare this to the "facts" as presented by the experts.

Belzec is, allegedly, designed as we presumed: one building with three chambers. The room size, however, is in dispute—either 12 or 32 square meters per room, depending on the witness. Orthodoxy claims that the Germans could pack in 10 people per square meter, thus able to gas either 360 or 960 per cycle. With a 2-hour cycle, and running round the clock—as the experts claim they did—Belzec could thus kill up to 4,320 (or 11,520) per day.

Sobibor was designed in a very similar way, except, for some unknown reason, the three chambers were each 16 square meters. By a similar calculation, the camp could kill as many as 5,760 per day.

The two camps combined, then, yielded 10,000 (or 17,300) fatalities each day, at most.

Compare these numbers to the task: a combined 4,200 per day. Overkill, you may say. Or maybe our man was just being cautious. After all, gas chambers are cheap. Still, we are at least within the realm of possibility here.

But consider that other nagging problem, of body disposal. According to witnesses, neither Belzec nor Sobibor had a single crematorium. Instead they opted for the mass-burial approach: for a full nine

months in the former camp, five in the latter. Then they changed their minds, deciding to exhume and burn, in the open air, all the buried corpses—at a rate exceeding 3,000 per day. The incoherence of this speaks for itself.[\[7\]](#)

So ignoring the (insurmountable) disposal problem, the two camps, in their initial (alleged) configurations, seem to be easily capable of handling the task. The capacity is 200-400% of that required to do the job in 18 months. This suggests that the Nazis would have had the option of accelerating things, finishing the gruesome project in nine months, or perhaps even six, if the situation so dictated.

But things take a bizarre turn just a few months later. Rather than addressing the monumental disposal problem, Globocnik and team instead make two inexplicable decisions: (1) they *increase* the gassing capacity at *both* camps, and (2) they decide to build a *third* camp (Treblinka), of equal capacity (3 chambers), again with no disposal capability.

The absurdity of this situation is hard to overestimate. The decision to build Treblinka was likely made in March or April (construction began in May), and the decision to double the number of Belzec chambers came soon thereafter;[\[8\]](#) six chambers were in operation there by June 1942. And barely a month later, perhaps by July, the Nazi team opted to double the chambers at Sobibor and, at the same time, to go to six (or perhaps 10, depending on witnesses) double-size chambers at Treblinka—which had just begun operation.

So the gassing situation as of September was truly mind-boggling. Assuming round-the-clock operation, Belzec could have gassed 14,400 per day. (Lest the reader think I am exaggerating here, consider this statement in the 2001 *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, p. 178: “Belzec was the first camp to be equipped with permanent gas chambers, which had the capacity to kill 15,000 persons a day.”) Sobibor, 11,500. And Treblinka, assuming just six large (32 sq meter) chambers, an astonishing 23,000 daily. The sum total: *49,000 gassings each day*, maximum capacity. Monthly, this comes to almost 1.5 million. And all without a single muffle.

Recall, once again, the task at hand: 4,200 per day, or 130,000 per month. At the above rate, the entire General Government would have been emptied of Jews in 6 weeks, and the entire zone of Reich influence—the 6 million—done within four months.[\[9\]](#)

Two further points here: First, even if the above numbers are relaxed, it does not substantially change the absurdity of the situation. For example, if we allow a generous 3-hour cycle time, and only six cycles per day, the combined capacity in September 1942 would still have been almost 25,000 per day, or about 730,000 monthly—more than five times the needed capacity.

Second, if we compare the capacities to the (alleged) actual gassings, the degree of overkill becomes even more apparent.

- Belzec had one peak month for gassings (August 1942), in which they processed about 4,300 per day; all other months never exceeded 2,700. And yet its capacity was over 14,000 daily.
- Sobibor’s peak gassing period was at the very beginning, during its 3-chamber phase, when it hit a peak of 670 per day—versus original capacity of 5,760. After expansion to six chambers, actual daily gassings fell *to below 400 a day*, even as the capacity *rose to 11,500*.

- In Treblinka, the daily capacity of 23,000 (or 38,400, assuming 10 chambers) compares to an average “actual” figure of 4,900 per day over the first four months of operation. But during 1943, the daily numbers never exceeded 1,000: a mere 3-4% of capacity.

All this entails incredibly poor planning by the Globocnik team—not to mention the stupendous oversight of having no plan to dispose of the bodies. Assuming, that is, that they were bent on mass murder.

More likely, of course, is that the three camps were delousing facilities and transit camps. They would have been built to temporarily house and disinfest Jews and other forced-labor conscripts who were on their way to resettlement camps or ghettos in the captured Soviet territory further east. The “gas chambers” cited by witnesses would have been either real showers, or delousing chambers for clothing and linens. Only a small number of incidental deaths would be expected, and thus no need to plan for high-volume body disposal—though the actual number may well have exceeded expectations.

Just as at Auschwitz, the *Aktion Reinhardt* camps had an incredible over-capacity of “gas chambers,” and an incredible under-capacity of crematoria (or other suitable disposal plans). No one would have consciously planned such a scheme. Thus, all the more reason to suspect that something is seriously wrong with the conventional story.

Notes:

- [1] “What began in 1941 was a process of destruction not planned in advance, not organized centrally by any agency. There was no blueprint and there was no budget for destructive measures.” (*New York Newsday*, 23 February 1983; Part II, p. 3) And again: “The process of destruction...did not, however, proceed from a basic plan. ... The destruction process was a step-by-step operation, and the administrator could seldom see more than one step ahead.” (*The Destruction of the European Jews*, 2003; pp. 50-51)
- [2] For many further such examples from his diary, see my article “Goebbels on the Jews” (Dalton 2010).
- [3] The actual number under German influence is very hard to confirm. As Longerich notes, the ‘six million’ figure must have included all allied territories, colonial regions, and so on. Notably, it did *not* include any Russian Jews, since that offensive would not begin until June 1941. Arguably, then, at the peak in early 1942, the Germans may have had access to 7 million or even more.
- [4] According to the German version of the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*; see citation in Graf, et al. (2010: 244).
- [5] Web site of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, online encyclopedia, entry “Operation Reinhard.” Just as the three camps were quite real, *Aktion Reinhardt* was real, also. It was named after Fritz Reinhardt, *Staatssekretär* in the Finance Ministry, who engineered the administration and logistics of collecting the possessions of deported persons and transmitting them to the Reich Finance Ministry to be disposed of for the benefit of the Reich. In that the three camps were “intake centers” for the forced-labor and resettlement programs, much of *Aktion Reinhardt* was

in fact conducted at these camps, and they may have been to some extent designed and established for the purpose.

- [6] There are many problems here including: (1) diesel engines produce very low levels of carbon monoxide; (2) there were much simpler, cheaper sources of CO than engines of any kind, and they yielded higher concentrations; (3) it is difficult to pump exhaust gas into a sealed volume (room); (4) there is no forensic evidence that confirms this method of killing. See Berg (2003) for details.
- [7] For a detailed explanation of the problems with open-air burning, see my book *Debating the Holocaust* (Dalton 2009), pp. 140-144.
- [8] The actual increase in capacity, based on floor area, was either a factor of 3.3 (assuming the smaller original three chambers) or 1.25 (with the larger). In a further anomaly, we are told that the original three Belzec chambers were torn down; why not leave them in place, along with the new chambers, if higher capacity was truly needed?
- [9] Though of course, by the time of the expansion in autumn 1942, a million Russian Jews had already been shot, and another million killed in the camps and ghettos, on the traditional account. Thus there would not have been 6 million around to be gassed.

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